

Friends of the Boyd, Inc.
P.O. Box 30629
Philadelphia, PA 19103
www.FriendsoftheBoyd.org

August 12, 2020

Philadelphia Historical Commission
Committee on Historic Designation meeting August 19, 2020
Re: Aldine Theater, 1826 Chestnut Street

Dear Committee on Historic Designation:

The **Friends of the Boyd, Inc.**, the nonprofit organization which championed the inclusion on the Philadelphia Register of the Boyd Theatre at 1908 Chestnut Street, and assisted in the successful listing of the Art Deco (Alexander Raymond Pace) building at 1900 Chestnut Street, and continue to exist for purposes specified at our website, **wish to express our support for the nomination** to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places of the former Aldine Theater at 1826 Chestnut, which has the **last intact exterior of a premiere Golden Age motion picture palace in Philadelphia.**

As the nomination notes, **the Aldine was an important, prestigious movie palace that served as a cultural showcase for movies for generations.**

“Movie palaces” are defined, to be brief, as moviehouses with more than 1000 seats which had grand facades and interiors. They were also built in neighborhoods, but only the downtown Philadelphia movie palaces had the original, exclusive first run movies along with first night premiere events. A movie started playing in only one theater in Philadelphia, and that theater would be downtown, before the movie later was shown in neighborhood movie theaters.

The architecture of movie palaces began with neoclassical styles, like ornate European opera houses. Later, the 2nd phase of movie palace architecture had “exotic” architecture such as ancient Egyptian, Chinese, Mayan themes or “atmospheric” with auditoriums that resembled outdoor courtyards with ceilings of twinkling stars and floating clouds. The 3rd and last phase of ornate movie palaces were in the Art Deco architectural style.

In downtown (later termed “Center City”) Philadelphia, most movie palaces

were built in neoclassical styles like the Aldine. Nearby, on Market Street, in Center City, all the other examples of movie palaces built in the neoclassical style- the Mastbaum (1929-1958, 2001 Market St), Erlanger (1927-1978, 21st & Market St NW corner), Stanley (1921-1973, 1902 Market St), the prior Stanley (1914-1980, aka Stanton, Milgram at 1620 Market St), Fox (1923-1980, 1600 Market St and Earle (1924-1953, 1046 Market St) theaters have all been demolished so it is even more important to protect the Aldine's exterior architecture. **The Aldine has the last surviving neoclassical exterior of the custom built Center City movie palaces in that neoclassical style.**

The **Pennsylvania Historic Resource Survey Form** filled out on 9-4-80 by George Thomas (and submitted separately with this comment) states the “**The Aldine was designed as a massive, corner theater**, with a marble base surmounted by a paino nobile articulated by corinthian pilasters framing blind windows, and supporting a modillioned entablature. The entrance is given emphasis by its placement, at the grand bowed corner. Yellow, brick, marble base and white terra cotta are the period palatte of materials, and have been well preserved.” Indeed! **The architecture of the “massive, corner theater” should be listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.**

As to the later architectural styles for movie palaces, though there were movie palaces built in the neighborhoods in the “exotic” style (such as the since gutted Lindy at 6902 Elmwood Ave which had a Chinese interior) or “atmospheric” style (the Circle in Frankford) none were built in those styles in downtown Philadelphia. There was one Center City movie palace built in the Art Deco style, the Boyd. Despite our (Friends of the Boyd) best efforts, much of the Boyd has been demolished. The facade, outdoor area, and Grand Lobby await reuse.

We wish to make **three additional points** below as follows:

- (1) Philadelphia **civll rights history** was made at the Aldine Theatre;
- (2) the Aldine had a **long and illustrious history** (1921-1994 being **73 years, much longer than most other movie palaces**) of movie premieres, special film events and showcase first run engagements of many films that entertained Philadelphians for generations, such as the following:
 - silent classics, often with orchestra accompaniment, such as “The Ten Commandments” (1923), “The Big Parade” (1926), “The Way of all Flesh”(1927), “King of Kings” and “The Phantom of the Opera” (1927)
 - “Fantasia” (1940) a movie which famously included music from the Philadelphia Orchestra
 - the 1942 showcasing of “Citizen Kane” a movie that William

Randolph Hearst prevented from being elsewhere, so RKO leased the Aldine to show it

The late David Mallery of Philadelphia, a Germantown Friends teacher of English who hosted in the 1970s “The Movie Buff” a movie appreciation show on CBS 3, emailed (separately attached) of his moviegoing at the Aldine which began in 1934. He concluded that **“I ‘see’ the Boyd and the Aldine, across 19th Street from each other, on Chestnut Street, as splendid flagships for what we know now were the great days of The Movies, pre-television.”**

- (3) Even the current **marquee**, dating from when the closed movie theater was converted to CVS, is a lovingly made replica of the original marquee.

IMPORTANT LOCAL CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY HAPPENED AT THE ALDINE THEATRE

In his July 21, 2020 article “Culture War at 19th & Chestnut Street” at The PhillyHistory Blog, Discoveries from the City Archives

<https://blog.phillyhistory.org/index.php/2020/07/culture-war-at-19th-and-chestnut-streets/>

Ken Finkel described how **legendary local civil rights lawyer Raymond Pace Alexander successfully sued to integrate the Aldine Theatre in 1925** when it refused to seat African-Americans who sought to see “The Ten Commandments”. A decade later, **Alexander built his own office building at 1900 Chestnut Street, the Art Moderne corner building facing the Aldine Theatre** and which is listed on the Philadelphia Register. Alexander was later elected to Philadelphia City Council and was appointed as the first black judge on the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas. **It would be appropriate to have both the Aldine, the place of one of his great Civil Rights victories, and facing it across the street, his office building at 1900 Chestnut St, both on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places!**

THE ALDINE HAD A LONG AND ILLUSTRIOUS HISTORY IN SHOWCASING MOVIES IN PHILADELPHIA

The December 15, 1925 “The Exhibitor” trade journal, an article (“Merry Widow” Wins Plaudits of Exclusive First Night Audience) about the movie “The Merry Widow” at the Aldine, began by noting the following:

“Aldine first nights have become a sort of institution in the theatrical life of the city akin, in their way, to the first nights of important plays and the

opera. These premieres invariably attract people prominent in all walks of life and the stamp of approval accorded by such an audience is the endorsement of the intelligent theatre-going class of our city.”

Below is the **Introduction** I that I wrote, based upon my research, at the cinematreasures.org page on the Internet for the Aldine :

<http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/3358>

The Georgian Revival style building at the southeast corner of 19th and Chestnut Street now houses a CVS Pharmacy. On November 11, 1921, this was the Aldine Theatre, opened by local theatre operators, brothers Fred D. and M.E. Felt, with 1,500 seats and opened as Philadelphia's exclusive, first run showcase for United Artists films with Douglas Fairbanks in "The Three Musketeers". It was named after the Aldine Hotel which was one block to the west. It is partly on the site of the Aldine Hotel that the Boyd Theatre was built in 1928. In 1921, the Felts also built or acquired the Ambassador Theatre on Baltimore Avenue in Philadelphia, the Aldine Theatre in Pittsburgh, and the Aldine Theatre and Parkway Theatre, both in Wilmington, DE.

The style of the interior of the Aldine Theatre was Empire, the second phase of Neo-Classic style. The first phase of Neo-Classic style, Adam, characterized some other movie palaces in downtown Philadelphia. At the Aldine Theatre, two marble grand stairways led from the marble lobby upstairs to the loge seating and restrooms. The auditorium ceiling had a crystal dome through which colored lights filtered. On the orchestra floor, there were raised level box seats which ran the entire length of the auditorium. The mezzanine had four rows of seats. A twenty piece orchestra and a 3 manual, 27 rank Moeller pipe organ accompanied silent movies, and in the talkie era, played between the shows.

With a review of "The Merry Widow" the Exhibitor trade magazine in 1925 stated that "Aldine first nights have become a sort of institution in the theatrical life of the city akin, in their way, to the first nights of important plays and opera." Silent movies showcased at the movie palace included "The Ten Commandments" (1923), "The Big Parade"(1926), "The Way of all Flesh"(1927), "King of Kings" and "The Phantom of the Opera" starring Lon Chaney(1927), with orchestra accompaniment). Legendry local civil rights lawyer Raymond Pace Alexander successfully sued the Aldine Theatre in 1925 when it refused to seat African-Americans who sought to see "The Ten Commandments". A decade later, Alexander built his own office building at 1900 Chestnut Street, the Art Moderne corner building across the block, facing the Aldine Theatre. In the 1920's, the Stanley Co. tookover.

On February 9, 1940 the Aldine Theatre hosted the world premiere of the movie "Vigil in the Night" and in May, 1940, the world premiere of the movie

"Turnabout". In December, 1940, actor Sabu appeared in person for the opening day of the film "The Thief of Bagdad". Disney's "Fantasia"(1940) which featured the Philadelphia Orchestra was shown for twelve weeks with the Aldine being the only local theatre equipped with "Fantasound". "Dumbo" was shown in 1941 and "How Green Was My Valley" was shown for six weeks in early 1942. RKO leased the theatre for four weeks, starting in March 1942, so Philadelphians could see "Citizen Kane". "Bambi" and "For Whom the Bell Tolls" were on the screen in 1943. Seats at \$1,000 each were sold for the December 14, 1944 premiere of "Frenchman's Creek" in order to raise an estimated \$1.2 million in war bonds. More than \$4.5 million dollars of 'E' bonds were sold at the June 19, 1945 'bond premiere' of "The Valley of Decision" starring Greer Garson. In January, 1950, the Aldine hosted the world premiere of the film noir "Outside the Wall" which was partly filmed in Philadelphia, and the premiere of "Borderline" with the film's star Claire Trevor and her husband, the movie director, appearing in person. The East Coast premiere of "A Life of Her Own" was held on August 30, 1950. "The River" actress Adrienne Corri appeared in person at the film's December 1951 opening night. "Cyrano de Bergerac" was on the screen in 1951 with tickets sold out four weeks in advance. Cyrano's star Jose Ferrer, appeared in person in May 1952 for the showing of "Anything Can Happen".

In 1953, facing competition from television, the new owners of Stanley Warner sold the Aldine Theatre to a parking garage operator. Town leaders protested the intended new use, so the parking garage operator decided to remodel and reopen the movie theatre. In 1954, the Aldine Theatre closed for considerable interior remodeling supervised by local theatre architect William Harold Lee. Air conditioning was added, as the movie theatre had always closed during summer. Renamed the Viking Theatre, it reopened a few months later on July 1, 1954, a huge 57 foot wide screen for 'scope films, and reduced seating capacity from 1,296 to 991. Anne Blyth appeared on stage for the gala opening of The Viking Theatres' first movie, "The Student Prince". The Viking neon sign, 38 feet tall, had a ship and oars that animated, but the city insisted the animation cease as it was distracting motorists. "Funny Face" was shown in 1957. Disney's "The Sword and the Stone" was on the big screen in 1963. The Viking Theatre was closed in 1963

It reopened December 12, 1967 with a benefit premiere of Walt Disney's "The Jungle Book". Now known as the Cinema 19, with 1,086 seats (of which the loge balcony held 70), refurbished with white ceiling to floor drapes, red carpeting, oyster white seats, and new lighting fixtures imported from Denmark. It was operated by New York City art house movie theatre owner David Rugoff. With Center City moviehouses still showcasing exclusive first runs for the entire Philadelphia region, the local premiere of "The Last Picture Show" (1971) was attended by the director Peter Bogdanovich and star Cybil Sheppard. "The French Connection" opened on October 6, 1971, and "The Poseidon Adventure" opened on December 12, 1972. In 1975, Rugoff & Becker Theatres became

Cinema 5 Theatres when they were acquired by Pacific Theatre (then owners of RKO Stanley Warner). The theatre closed in late-1978.

The Sameric Co. acquired the theatre, twinned it and reopened it March 21, 1980 as Sam's Place One and Two. United Artists acquired it, along with the entire Sameric chain in 1988. First run mainstream releases played to weekend crowds including with many nearby Rittenhouse Square residents. Sam's Place closed in August 1994 with "Clear and Present Danger" in the big theatre to the left, which had over 800 seats, and "The Little Rascals" in the smaller theatre to the right.

CVS Pharmacy leased the building, converted it into a pharmacy, and added pictures of the Aldine Theatre on the outside of the building.

Contributed by Michael R. Rambo Jr., Howard B. Haas

THE CURRENT MARQUEE IS A LOVINGLY MADE REPLICA OF THE ORIGINAL

The **current marquee** was modeled after the original. The August 11, 1994 Philadelphia Daily News (article sent separately with this comment) reported that developer Bruce Goodman had a plan that "calls for restoring the original marquee, opening up long-blocked windows overlooking Chestnut Street and taking down signs obscuring other details of the building." The article reported that Stuart G. Rosenberg, architect for the restoration, stated that they had met with the historical commission, and that "They love what we're doing because we're getting all the schlock off the building."

The below 2 photos, historical and current, show the original and replica marquees.

“Bitter Sweet” (1940) photo, an extra with Disney's DVD release, showing original marquee, also shown in photos in the nomination



September 16, 2018 photo by Howard B. Haas of the building showing replica
marquee



In summary, Friends of the Boyd, Inc. urge the Committee on Historic Designation to recommend inclusion of the Aldine Theatre on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. **The Aldine building has lasted almost a century. The Aldine was an important venue for showcasing movies, and has an impressive corner grandeur. Please protect it!**

Respectfully submitted

Howard B. Haas
President, Friends of the Boyd, Inc.

Subj: Requested NewsBank Article(s)
Date: 2/1/2008 4:44:16 PM Eastern Standard Time
From: infoweb@newsbank.com
To: howardbhaas@aol.com

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COMING ATTRACTION AT THEATER: CVS

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Philadelphia Daily News (PA)-August 11, 1994
Author: Francesca Chapman, Daily News Staff Writer

Now showing at Sam's Place: "The Little Rascals."

Coming soon: Carter's Little Pills.

The 73-year old Center City movie palace is under agreement of sale to developer Bruce Goodman, who said yesterday he's leased the property to the

CVS drugstore chain.

"We're going to preserve the outside of the building, clean it up, and make it as new as possible," the Jenkintown developer said.

Goodman said he expected to close the sale later this month. Construction would begin immediately after, and the store could open "within the next seven to eight months."

The two-story, 13,000-square-foot theater has been on the market for more than four years. Goodman said he was buying the building for \$1.7 million, and would put more than \$1 million into its conversion.

That includes replacing the leaky roof and aged mechanical and electrical systems, and building a new slab to level the floor of the theater's auditorium.

Stuart G. Rosenberg, architect for the renovation, said his plan allotted more than 10,000 square feet of the old theater for pharmacy and selling space - substantially larger than the average drugstore. Contractors will remove the theater's interior balcony, but build a new mezzanine to take advantage of the 40-foot ceilings, he said.

The plan also calls for restoring the original marquee, opening up long-blocked windows overlooking Chestnut Street and taking down signs obscuring other details of the building.

"We've met with the historical commission. They love what we're doing

because we're getting all the schlock off the building," Rosenberg said.

Earlier this year, Sam's Place seemed to be a likely site for the Chicago-based Walgreen's chain. Walgreen's announced its planned expansion into the Philadelphia market shortly after the city's Zoning Board of Adjustment approved converting Sam's Place into a drugstore.

Yesterday, Walgreen's spokesman Michael Polzin said the chain did not feel the theater site "would fit in with our overall concept."

Officials from CVS could not be reached for comment.

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Subj: **The Aldine Theatre**
Date: 3/17/2009 11:28:51 A.M. Eastern Daylight Time
From: mallery@davidseminars.com
To: HowardBHaas@aol.com

Dear Mr. Haas,.

I have warm memories of extraordinary treats at the Aldine.. The first I remember was George Arliss in THE HOUSE OF ROTHSCHILD IN 1934, which moved me very much, and that burst into technicolor for the final big-ceremony scene was a major event. I remember being charmed by Robert Young and Loretta Young as the young lovers and a very mean-spirited Boris Karloff as Rothschild's main antagonist. I was eleven years old for that one..

I was at the Aldine for the Robert Donat COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO that same year. (I note that it is out on DVD for the first time this month.) My mother flew out of the theatre, taking a taxi home—she didn't like the prison scene. My father and I stayed.

I loved the huge block-long movie-heralding ads along 19th street wall of the Aldine in those days, starting at the corner of 19th and Chestnut, and reaching almost to Sansom Street.

Also at the Aldine: an 11:00 a.m. Saturday showing of LOVE AFFAIR (1939) with Irene Dunne and Charles Boyer—then and now a legendary movie, later re-made by the same director with Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr as AN AFFAIR TO REMEMBER).

And a major event I experienced at the Aldine also in 1939: WUTHERING HEIGHTS with Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon, probably the most honored movie of that movie-banner-year next to GONE WITH THE WIND.),

Yes, I too saw FANTASIA there, with the strangely vibrating seats to intensify the music and images!

I "see" the Boyd and the Aldine, across 19th Street from each other, on Chestnut Street, as splendid flagships for what we know now were the great days of The Movies, pre-television.

As always,

David Mallery

On Mar 17, 2009, at 9:39 AM, HowardBHaas@aol.com wrote:

Dear Mr. Mallery,

Thanks so much for your fascinating write up of your encounters with Frank Lloyd Wright and the information about the Europa Theatre.

Sadly, the Boyd's neighbor, the Aldine (later Viking, Cinema 19, Sam's Place) has been a CVS for more than a decade. I saw many movies there as Sam's Place and spoke with a fellow who saw "Fantasia" there. I'd be very interested in your experiences at that theater, if you would like to share.

Howard B. Haas



 Delete ...

the Aldine

 You replied on Wed 8/12/2020 2:20 PM

MF

Martin Claude Felt <faithfullyfelt@gmail.com>

Wed 8/12/2020 2:10 PM

To: preservation

Cc: Richard Rubin <rrubin11@gmail.com>

    ...

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I am Martin Claude Felt

Writing to you to please preserve this most important historical building THE ALDINE in the history of early American cinema and the Philadelphia of the 20's 30's. I am resident and living in Italy and very connected to the world of cinema with many directors.

Please let me know the progress of this important matter

Martin Claude Felt
contra fogliarella 24
Ostuni 72017
BR
Italia
39 3476802427

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